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AUTHOR Manzo, A. V.
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ABSTRACT

Described are two English units--Aggression and Death--developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, intended for use in the inner city secondary school. Built on the premise that erudition should be an extension of the search for self-knowledge, both units involved the students in a general discussion of how aggression (or death) is apparent in our daily lives and analyzed the ways in which we cope with these problems. Following the reading of a specially prepared article (e.g., high interest, low vocabulary), as well as more literary articles for information on the topic, a reading guide was used to further language skills and an understanding of the issues. Group discussion and student interviews with the author of the special article encouraged a deeper analysis of the subject. Finally, the students were asked to complete one of five possible independent projects. An initial evaluation of the unit on Aggression showed the need for more student participation; consequently a "Think and Do" section (involving questions and activities) was added to the unit on Death. It was generally felt that a discussion of any topic works best by looking first to the needs of the students, and then to the available materials. (HS)

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SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH READING

A. V. Manzo

Associate Professor

University of Missouri-Kansas City

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Paper presented at the

University of Virginia Conference

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Partial Report on the UMKC role

in the EPDA (COMPASS) Project

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Self-Discovery Through Reading

A. V. Manzo

The search for meaning has caught up with us. Even before the strenuous breakout period following the constraints of the gray-suit 50's, wise men were noting that education must be more personal, more touching of human needs. In 1953 Laurence S. Kubie wrote, "Self-knowledge is the Forgotten Man of our entire educational system and indeed of human culture in general. Without self knowledge it is possible to be erudite, but not wise."

At UMKC, as our contribution to the U. S. Office of Education sponsored effort to "improve the teaching of reading in the content areas," we have tried to develop English-reading units designed to help students to become wise as well as erudite; i.e. "to put it all together."

Theme and Rationale for English Units

The UMKC English units are built on the premise that erudition should be an extension of the search for wisdom; or, in more personal terms, an extension of the general quest for knowledge of self. This is not a revolutionary concept, except if you happen to notice that literature is seldom taught in this way.

The significance of this approach is that the student is first and foremost encouraged to explore a basic issue bearing on the human condition. His own ideas are brought out and nurtured, additional information is presented to help him in his deliberations. Presently the student is brought to the literary scene. Here he continues his

search, not for new information of the data/fact variety, but rather for synthesis, higher level articulation; artistry. There are variations on this basic pattern, as when a particularly lucid and heuristic piece of literature can be used to initiate a theme of study, but the basic unit model works best, we believe, when it begins with the student, his needs and awarenesses, and progresses outward.

Aggression and Death: Death and Aggression

For no reason that can be easily defended, unless one happens to intuitively agree with it, the first two units developed were built around Aggression and Death--compatible but macabre bedfellows.

The aggression unit has already been used once, and is quite naturally under some revision. The unit on death is in process.

These units have been developed in cooperation with two teachers in the high school where they are being used. Mr. Everett Bennett, an English and reading teacher is largely responsible for the Aggression unit, and Mrs. Marilyn Eannet, chairman of the English department, the unit on Death.

The school in which these units were generated and are being taught deserves notice. It is a rather typical inner city, primarily black populated, high school. The building is massive, Room 222ish, old, but in good repair. While only three stories high, the building appears much taller--it rests on the crest of one of the city's higher elevations. Like most long-lived schools, Paseo High has many notable alumni of present national noteriety. Many of us believe it has at least as many of future noteriety.

Basic Unit Plan: Aggression--Its Causes and Manifestations

Introduction

1. Readiness-type discussion of the general level of anger which often seems to surround us--angry shop keepers, discourteous public servants, irritable students, disillusioned teachers.

2. Probe situation: Why do people often seem so emotionally pent-up, so angry?

Discussion and Personalization

3. Deeper Analysis: Look a bit more carefully at the shop keeper, public servant, etc., describe their lot. Any revelations? Personalize: Do any of us have parents or friends who have occupations like those we are describing? Choose a role. Describe your experiences... How do you deal with your frustrations?

Further Conjecture and Information Need

4. What do we know about frustration, anger, aggression? When discussion has evolved to the point where the students have exhausted their generally sketchy knowledge of this basic human factor, a need for more information becomes apparent.

Have Information Available. In anticipation of this need a special article was prepared at two levels. Dr. R. Chris Martin of the UMKC psychology department developed a brief (four-page) article written as if for the general lay public on Aggression: Some Causes and Manifestations.

Provide for Ability Difference. Realizing that many students would not be able to read even this laymen-like article, an edited version was prepared by Dr. Warren H. Wheelock, Director of the UMKC Reading Clinic,

and one of the authors of the popular high-interest, low-vocabulary Breakthrough series for secondary school students and adults.

Learning the Language

5. In order to move the discussion of aggression to yet higher levels of analysis, a common language and some common agreements on some basic facts had to be established. These, however, had to be preceded by some common understandings of what had been read.

Basic Understandings. To achieve this a reading guide was developed. It was constructed so as to be useful for both the original and the edited version of the Martin article. The guide had five parts. Part one consisted primarily of multiple choice questions designed to develop literal level understandings of the basic information. Some writing was required for two items. The second through fifth sections required increasingly more sophisticated analysis, synthesis, and application of information. Small group discussion followed the completion of each section.

Beyond the Basic Information. The combination of readiness activities, reading, and in-depth discussions moved the students beyond the limits of their first impressions and even beyond the boundaries of the information available in the original article. Thus a special large group session was planned in which they could interview Dr. Martin, the author of the original article.

Inquiry Training

7. An announcement was made to the 120 students participating in the unit that they would have an opportunity to meet in a large group and interview the author of the article. They were encouraged to meet with

their teachers in small groups and to generate a series of questions and comments for Dr. Martin's visit.

As expected, the questions tended to deal primarily with personalized concerns relating to the topic. The distinction between "aggressiveness" (as assertiveness) and aggression (as hostility) was a popular distinction, as were the various manifestations of passive-aggression.

Literature

8. Articles of a literary type were read and analyzed. The first reading followed the earliest discussion; the second followed the analysis of the factual information in the Martin article.

The two most popular articles were "The Public Hating" and "Small Accident" (Something Else, Scott Foresman, 1970). Reading guides accompanied both articles.

Independent Projects

9. Each student was expected to complete one of five choices of independent projects related to the unit. Teachers met with small groups of students to lend structure and guidance to their work. Projects varied--e.g., write (or act out with others) a one-act play, showing the fine line of difference between "aggressiveness" and aggression; or describe in detail three situations leading up to a point where a person might be driven to an act of aggression. (To emphasize the distinction between "aggressiveness" and aggression, the former always appeared in quotes; the latter underlined.)

Evaluation and Revision

10. Aware that even our best thoughts and efforts could not produce a flawless product, the unit was monitored from beginning to end. The aspect of the unit which seemed most in need of improvement was the student participation section. Think and Do components seemed to be needed for each day's activities. This realization is reflected in the unit on Death.

Death: How? Why? The finality of death is apparently something we try not to think about. The realization of it, however, pervades our total life orientation and many of our social structures. For all its influence, death is undoubtedly the natural phenomenon least discussed in school. It has come to that distinction because sex, the former front runner as most pervasive and least recognized, has now been officially discovered.

The unit on death follows the same general paradigm used with aggression. It features a fact sheet on the clinical aspects of death, a related discussion of transplants, etc., a compilation of hard information on how people die (thousands from insect bites!), a review of some psychological problems and typical attitudes surrounding death and much good poetry to show the many ways to think about Death and Dying.

The Think and Do aspect of the unit involves daily instigative questions and activities: a self-analysis inventory to discover one's attitudes on death, collected examples of the humor used to bring comic relief to the general fear of dying ("Death is nature's way of telling us to slow down."), periodic thought questions for discussion--who would you bring back from the dead (historical figure)? Why? Fabricate a story of life after death. Is immortality desirable? Can inducing death (in self or others) ever be justified? How would you pictorially represent death?

The rationale for a unit on death seems to have been assured by the popularity of a recent TV special, "To All My Friends on Shore." The special starred Bill Cosby, a hardworking, overstriving man who has his dream of advancing the social-economic status of his family shattered. His son contracts sickle-cell anemia, a virulent blood disease that attacks mostly blacks. Cosby's analysis of death with his son is realistic and impressive. We have ordered the complete transcript from CBS and plan to reinact the play at Paseo.

Death Is a Hard Act to Follow. What next? Cancer, vengeance, terror? No, probably women's liberation, then Love--a clinical assessment and literary review. Perhaps a survey: "Select three themes from the options listed below. Which first, second, etc.?" Perhaps two or three simultaneous units with different groups planning and reporting to the class.

A Matter of Relevance. Revelance is under the desk blotter, yet we look for it in the sky. The thesis underlying these units is simple: Literature and academic study in general was initiated by bright thoughtful men in search of understandings about themselves and the contagious, curious events which surround us. If we permit ourselves to be reminded of this, it is a relatively simple matter to go back and trace the viability of studying anything from photosynthesis to the Canterbury Tales. Anything.*

*The materials used in the above described units can be gotten by writing the author at the Reading Center, Education Building, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5200 Holmes, Kansas City, Mo. 64110.